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## PUBLISHER'S PREFACE

When Mahatma Gandhi — the “great-souled one,” the leader of India who nonviolently freed his country from British rule — died, a now famous photograph was taken of all his possessions: his simple white cotton piece of clothing, his glasses, his sandals, and his well-worn copy of *The Bhagavad Gita*. It was a book he read daily, a source of endless inspiration to him.

The *Gita* is read daily by millions of people in India, as well as throughout the world; it is in the homes of literally hundreds of millions of people, and is considered by a great many to be the finest source of spiritual teaching in the world.

When Jack Hawley presented us with this extraordinary prose version of it, which tells the story so clearly and beautifully, everyone in our company felt as if we had been given a great gift — one we feel blessed to be able to publish and share with the world.

There is endless wisdom and inspiration in these pages. The *Gita* has proven itself over hundreds of generations to be one of the greatest gifts ever given to humanity, one of the greatest scriptures ever written.



Read it straight through, as a magnificent story filled with great teaching. Or simply open it to any page at random, and ponder the words, applying them to your life experience.

This is more than a book, more than the writings of any mortal man or woman. It is Divine revelation, filled with the words of a vast, illuminated soul — and these words can lead you to a far greater life experience, and even to illumination itself.

Marc Allen  
New World Library



PREFACE TO THE PAPERBACK EDITION

LESSONS LEARNED

*“The whole and sole purpose of the Bhagavad Gita,  
the only reason it was  
originally given to humanity,  
is to help people rid themselves of their  
worldly suffering, find true happiness and achieve  
Self-realization.”*

— Sathya Sai Baba

Twenty-five years ago my wife and I were traveling across India’s Deccan plateau in a non-air-conditioned taxi in the middle of summer. Late in the day, wet and wrinkled, we stopped at a modest guesthouse to quench our thirst and lay our heads on a pillow. Thirsting also for something to read, I noticed a lone book, *The Bhagavad Gita*, resting on the only shelf in the room. I had been introduced to this ancient text some ten years earlier and had read a few memorable excerpts, but the teachings had never gained a foothold in my awareness.

As I flipped through its dog-eared pages, I stopped at chapter seven where Krishna, the heroic Divinity figure of the *Gita*’s story, begins to describe the very nature of the Divine. I was enthralled and began reading aloud to Louise, explaining that this was “God” talking:

I am Pure Consciousness, the underlying essence of all elements and beings.

I am the innate nature of everything.

In pure water I am the sweet taste.

In the sun and moon I am the radiance.

In the very center of human beings I live as virility and courage.

I am the slight, delicate scent, the sweet fragrance of the earth.

I am the brilliance in both fire and sun, and I am the light of Divinity in all beings.

I am the subtle spirit in spiritual practices that gives them their existence — the love in the devotee, the simple austerity in the ascetic, the sweet sense of charity in the giver.

This narrative on Divinity picks up several times throughout the book, but in those first few words of chapter seven we are plunged pleasantly into what has become a lifelong love affair with the wondrous *Bhagavad Gita*.

Since that encounter in the guesthouse, I have researched and written three books on the *Gita*. This one is the basis, the source, the reservoir of practical spiritual knowledge from which the others rise. Over these years we have traveled the world lecturing and doing workshops on the *Gita*'s teachings.

### *Five Beguiling Lessons*

With the advent of New World Library's new paperback edition of the book, I would like to share some of things I have learned over the years.

1. I learned that there is a crucial difference between regular and spiritual reading.

This difference makes a *big* difference. Our everyday reading, which is part and parcel of living and working in the world, is primarily for gaining worldly information. Spiritual reading has loftier purposes — to reposition us beyond the worldly and lead us into spaces the mind could never imagine, to touch the Divine in each of us. We may skim during regular reading, but we need to approach our spiritual reading with a higher awareness.

I once met a young man in a local restaurant in India. His English was good but he had a thick European accent. I found myself leaning a bit closer to make sure I could hear. He told me how much he was enjoying reading and rereading my *Bhagavad Gita* book.

I asked how he liked the German translation. “Oh,” he said, “I’m reading it in English — and I like reading it in English because it makes me think. If I was reading it in German, I would go through it too fast, like I always do, and then, when finished, I would fool myself that I had understood it. But that would not be true!

“Reading it in English, not my native language, makes me think about every idea and word, and ask myself, ‘Do I truly understand this?’ The extra work puts it deeper inside me, and I end up knowing it better.”

We all zoom through our reading piles as he does. Whether the content is important or not, we click into a mindless, autopilot mode and thus take in a tiny percentage of what we skim. Speeding might be appropriate for most reading jobs, but speed kills spiritual reading. We have to lean a bit nearer to it.

## **2. I learned that two of the points I made in the earlier edition need to be emphasized.**

First, contrary to its title, this book is not a simple “walk-through.” When the book first came out, I wrote in the Introduction that the stroll may not be bump free. In retrospect, that wasn’t clear enough. The book is written in easy English,

but reading it entails positive effort. One reviewer said it's a book that asks much and gives back so much more. Moving through it is a great exercise for your spirit, and like any exercise, physical or soul based, you emerge in better shape.

Second, when I wrote the how-to-read-it pointers in the Introduction a decade ago, I conveyed the idea that getting the most out of this book is largely a matter of one's attitude and mood. At that time I *sensed* the importance of this, but now, having lived with the book in the real world, I *know* it! One's frame of mind while reading truly does make a difference. So when you read the Introduction (especially the last two paragraphs on page xxiv), inhale the suggestions — turn your reading into a receptive meditation.

3. **I learned that the spiritual journey is the central expedition of your life, and this book may well be the most important reading you ever do. Period.**
4. **I learned to communicate the *Gita's* vastness by narrowing my own focal point.**

A few years ago I struggled mightily for days, weeks, trying to write an article on what the *Gita's* splendor and utility mean to me. The prospect of composing yet another intellectual analysis or codification of the principles bored me. As I pondered, an ancient voice within me whispered, "Share your love." The *aha* doors opened. . . .

I love the *Gita's* basic goodness, and how it pushes me beyond merely striving to be a good person, toward becoming my own Divinity within. I love that it provides me with page after page of methods for calling forth that extreme goodness. And I love how it continually reminds me to do that.

I love my inner peacefulness whenever I enter the *Gita's* teachings. I love how almost all my anger has been eliminated, and how worldly agitations are largely things of the past for me.

I love the *Gita* for its depth, its breadth, and mostly its



height — the way it pulls me upward. I love it for its humaneness as well as its sublimity.

I love the ultra-honesty in the *Gita* about religion — how it lives in the open space beyond religious dogma and yet embraces a reverence for the scriptural teachings of all faiths.

I love the *Gita's* insistence that we consciously live by our own inner truth. I love how it doesn't compromise an iota on this, how it won't put up with any excuses where truth is concerned.

I love the *Gita's* clarity about how we have to live with the consequences of our actions, good or bad, but with no hint of punishment. I love how it neither excuses nor overlooks humanity's dark side, and yet doesn't dwell there. Sanskrit, the precise, spiritual language of the *Gita*, has no word for *damnation*.

I love the antiquity of the *Gita*, appreciating that it precedes by thousands of years the societies we Westerners think of as the cradles of civilization. This isn't merely "older is better" snobbery. *The Bhagavad Gita* has passed the persistent tests of countless centuries, and yet it remains the basis for all the spiritual teachings known in the world today.

I love the *Gita's* teachings on *acceptance* — not mere compliance, but acceptance as an overpowering state of mind and way of being, a receptiveness so elevated that one's life forever soars when touched by the magic of it. This all-embracing acceptance is the most shining facet of love, the very essence of spiritual surrender.

I love the happiness in the *Gita* and thoroughly appreciate its careful explanation of how to attain real bliss. I also appreciate that it lays out what happiness is not and is so clear about the pitfalls in the way of lasting happiness.

I love that the all-powerful Divinity described in the *Gita* is loving and nonpunitive.

I love that the *Gita* looks death (and life) squarely in the eye and offers a straightforward system for not just conquering our fear of death but triumphing over death itself!

Finally, I love the *Gita's* emphasis on *application* rather

than airy theology — insisting that putting the teachings into practice will lead to a happier, more graceful life.

**5. I learned that there's an enthralling paradox in all this.**

In the final analysis, it's not about this book, and it's not even about the brilliant, never-changing principles and teachings of *The Bhagavad Gita* itself. It's about *you*. It's about you, learning to rid yourself of your worldly suffering and find true happiness. It's about you, learning to slip quietly into your own True Self Within. The only real destination in life is your inner Divinity. In the end it's all you have.



## INTRODUCTION

### WHY THE BHAGAVAD GITA?

*“Ancient, but strangely close and familiar. . . .”*

The *Gita* is an epic mystical poem about life, death, love, and duty from the peoples who settled in the river valleys in southern Asia and developed a sophisticated culture thousands — probably scores of thousands — of years ago. It is a half-inch-thick poem embedded in the middle of a six-inch-thick poem, the *Mahabharatha*, a literary masterpiece about the heights and depths of the human soul.

*The Bhagavad Gita* contains the inner essence of India, the moral and spiritual principles found in the very earliest scriptures of this ancient land. One of them, the *Rig Veda*, is said to be the oldest record of humankind! To read *The Bhagavad Gita*, therefore, is to reach countless epochs back in time — and yet, as I settled into these cobwebby teachings, they felt

strangely close and familiar. It was as if some force could at long last take my hand and walk me down a not-so-quiet path to important and meaningful truths; as if I — this too-worldly Western businessman living behind the fading whitewashed walls of an ashram in southern India — could now, finally, be let in on the most profound secrets of humankind.

This ancient tome is not, as one might expect, about withdrawing from life to meditate in some far-off cave. It's more of a manual to clutch close, a friendly guide for living a more spiritual life today — a more purposeful and fulfilling life even while staying fully active in the world. The *Gita* is very much about how to remove sorrow and pain from life and thus achieve contentment and serenity, which is a wondrous goal. But even more than that, it's about the absolute highest prize: liberation and self-realization in this lifetime. It's not merely about the quest for these lofty things; it's a detailed map to the treasure itself — a handbook for living a higher, more satisfying existence here, now, in today's tough and troubling times.

And the *Gita* is also about how to die, and what happens after.

As I studied the *Gita*, I found myself so engrossed in this old yet current scripture that I carefully worked through each of the 700 verses (*slokas*), one by one. I called it a “walkthrough,” and it was not an easy stroll. The *Gita*'s message is full of profound, sometimes intricate spiritual concepts. Many of the painstaking translations, written by scholars for other scholars, can be almost painfully thorough. And Sanskrit, the early language of the *Gita*, contains exact terms for spiritual and philosophical concepts that, when put into English, can sound too condensed — like one of those old pay-by-the-word telegrams (“Arrive Noon Tuesday Meet Me”). Important details are missing; you often don't know what is really being said.

I wanted to understand the book in a way that spoke as directly as possible to my struggles and daily concerns, so I developed a pattern of juggling five or six translations of the *Gita* on my desk and lap, scratching notations in the margins, checking one against the other, and writing out my own

synthesis of each *sloka* in modern American English. This allowed me to get into the flow of ideas and not interrupt my reading every few words to clarify the meaning of some hard-to-grasp idea. I ended up working my way through thirty-some versions, many over 1,000 pages, several consisting of two or three volumes (one was seventeen volumes).

It wasn't as onerous or bookish as it sounds because over the years I had already developed a relationship with the *Gita*. Although my cultural background (as a practical organization consultant from California via upstate New York) is far distant from India, for me the *Gita's* teachings were tangible and immediate. For twelve years my wife, Louise, and I had lived about six months each year in a spiritual community in rural India where the culture of the *Gita* is still a strong part of daily life. I was therefore able to test these teachings on the touchstone of life's trials as I lived them.

As each day closed, I would read my notes to Louise, who had also grown to love this great work, to see if the day's writings made sense to another ordinary, interested Westerner. We looked forward to these nightly sessions, and as we grew to better understand the *Gita*, we developed an even greater admiration and trust of it.

Dusting off the *Gita's* gems of wisdom and adding them to the necklace of our daily living changed us and beautified our lives (and perhaps our immersion in the *Gita* even saved Louise's life, as I explain in the Afterword). There is a humility that comes with rediscovering these old pearls that have touched countless millions of souls through many thousands of years. And there is an awe at seeing how germane they are to the problems of today's world.

The "walkthrough" metaphor contained more than I had envisioned. At first it just felt like a friendly term implying an ease of reading. But as the work progressed, my task became more evident: this needed to be a truly different style of *Gita*. The traditional way of imparting these ancient truths is to present a short, aphorism-like teaching (a "telegram phrase"), and then explain it through several pages of in-depth "commentary."

That process is too lumbering for today. This needed to be a livelier *Gita*, more attuned, a *Gita* that could be read from cover to cover without backtracking to recall certain words, or sidetracking into companion volumes to find out what it really means. This *Gita* had to stand on its own two feet, without crutches of any kind. The whole point is to take your time, walk through it from beginning to end, and enjoy the stroll.

Thus I found myself even more intensely juggling the many resource books, making sure that in the end I could stroll easily, and Louise could listen smoothly, with understanding. I had to repeat the meanings of unfamiliar words, and restate several times the explanations of certain ideas that are used quite differently in the *Gita* than we Westerners use them (the definition of *reality*, for example). I chose to repeat these clarifications as asides or in parentheses so the reading would continue to flow.

“Clarity and flow” became my mantra as the work developed, but I also had to ensure that it did not turn into just another interesting self-help book — that it retained its very special energy and remained a full-strength, undiluted *Gita*. I tested the manuscript with several people who are knowledgeable of Sanskrit and the *Gita*, including professor friends who are not at all shy about giving criticism. Some wrinkled their brows (“just for Westerners?”), but after getting into it they all liked it and offered many suggestions. A few even confessed that they had personally learned much from it. Not one of them found the frequent reminders too repetitious. Indeed, Krishna, the God figure in the *Gita*, restates the same truths again and again in different contexts and imageries — like a mother repeating lessons to her child.

That’s how it unfolded. In this quite natural way, this new version of *The Bhagavad Gita* shuffled happily into being — a concise but powerful book that invites ancient but strangely close and familiar ideas into our lives, and gives us new understanding of ancient truths.

## Timeless, Pure Truth

To read *The Bhagavad Gita* is to swing back and forth smoothly between the head and heart, between the worldly and the spiritual, arching between gaining knowledge and applying it in today's real world. In this swing from humanness to godliness lies the *Gita's* secret penetrating power, its ability to lift and move us.

The year is 3141 B.C.E. Arjuna, an esteemed warrior-prince at the height of his powers, the greatest man of action of his time, is readying to go into battle. It is a righteous fight to regain a kingdom rightfully his. All his life he has been a courageous, successful achiever, renowned for prowess in combat. But now, on the eve of the biggest clash of his career, an odd thing happens. His hands begin to shake.

Arjuna is in his magnificent war chariot pulled by four white steeds. The chariot driver, Arjuna's best friend from boyhood, is Krishna, an *Avatar*, an incarnation of Divinity on earth. Arjuna, who doesn't really understand Krishna's Divinity, has directed him to drive the chariot into the center of the plain where the great battle is soon to begin. The opposing armies have gathered on each side.

It is an epic scene: two lone figures parked between the legions of good and evil; masses of soldiers, tents, cook fires, neighing horses, banners snapping in the early-afternoon breeze; the bustle, noises, and smells of pre-battle filling the air.

Arjuna's eyes scan the opposing forces, pausing on former friends, revered uncles, teachers who taught him his warrior skills. All are bravely making ready for the mutual slaughter. He slumps, breathes heavily, and looks quizzically at Krishna.

Reading the *Gita*, we come to better understand life as an inner battle, a struggle for the mind, heart, body, and spirit. And, make no mistake, it is a fight to the death. We learn that our real enemies are not outside but within: our own desire, anger, and greed. This is what makes it so hard. These arch-enemies have linked forces so powerfully that they are all but unbeatable. We're losing.

The *Gita* boldly declares that spirituality is the only winning solution. Turn inward, it directs us, and upward. Look no further than the True Self Within.

**Seated in his chariot in the middle of the battlefield, the slumping Prince Arjuna, his voice barely audible, asks, "Why am I doing this, Krishna? Life is so cruel, so demanding. I don't know if I have the heart for battle anymore." His eyes fill with tears, his knees soften, and he sinks deeper into the vehicle seat. "Beloved friend," he says, "please tell me — what is it all about?"**

Like water that filters slowly down through earth and comes out fresh and pure, important ideas passing down through the sands of time are eventually rubbed clean and emerge as pure truth. Although stated in different ways at different times by different peoples of the world, these truths have been known to humanity for centuries, for millennia. Though all races and eras may have their own conceptions of God, they all do have God, and Truth, and Goodness. All higher religions and philosophical systems are in nearly complete agreement with these basics.

*The Bhagavad Gita* is one of the earliest, clearest, and most comprehensive statements of these perennial truths. In the *Gita*, the Divine comes to His friend man in the middle of a vicious war and carefully expounds the laws and principles that govern human life.

**We see Arjuna on the battlefield, this impressive warrior, bent, burdened, eyes glistening, pleading for the meaning of life. Krishna, totally calm, responds in effect, "Oh,**



**you really want to know?” With that, he takes the next twenty minutes to deliver the answer — straight from the Source!**

The *Gita*'s eighteen chapters can be divided into three clusters. The first six chapters focus mainly on knowing the True Self and, concurrently, on the need to perform one's worldly duties effectively for society's welfare. The next six concentrate on the very nature of the Godhead, and the great love for Him that springs from intimately knowing Him. The final six provide particular knowledge and wisdom for achieving the very purpose of existence, which is to liberate ourselves from the inevitable pain and sorrow that life deals us and ultimately to merge into that Godhead, Divinity itself.

All these are ideas of extraordinary size and power, with numerous subtleties and shades of thought. Krishna presents each of these huge ideas gradually, piece by piece, chapter after chapter, until the whole picture becomes clear.

**Imagine! A man we can all identify with is in dire straits, at a crossroads, brought to his knees by the great pressures and complexities of life, shakily reaching out. And his best friend, an incarnation of God, takes his hand and walks him through the answer — explaining step-by-step the most profound secrets of all ages.**

Walking through the *Gita* may not be bump free. Some words are unpronounceable and some of the ideas are so new to us or so different to our Western culture they can be missed, or worse, dismissed. The idea of *Atma*, for example, which is the Divinity in us, can feel strange to a Westerner (“me, God?”) until *Atma* is understood to be a version of the soul. The ideas of *detaching* and *surrendering* are anathema to most Westerners. For some, the concept of *Avatar* (an embodied God) is unthinkable; for others it is acceptable only if it happens to be *their* idea of God who inhabits a body.

Early in the story most readers agree with Arjuna's anti-

war sentiments, only to be dismayed when Krishna, seeming to justify war, tells him to go and fight! The shock diminishes as we gradually learn that it is not a question of being for or against war, or even an issue of slaying or being slain, but an issue of living by one's inner truth and doing one's duty. We have to keep reminding ourselves that the battle is metaphorical, that the war is being fought inside each of us and will continue throughout our lives.

There are bound to be other bumps. Many of the words in the original Sanskrit have multiple meanings (*karma*, for example), and some of the concepts may not appear fashionable in our times (*sacrifice*, *duty*, and *purity* are examples). There will probably be others.

The point is to try not to be turned off or dismiss anything in the *Gita* too early. These truths have survived the sands of time; what remains is amazingly pure and practical. This is a powerful work filled with Truth beyond intellectualization.

You have to read the *Gita* through your heart. It is your mood while reading that smoothes your way through this ancient scripture. Be as receptive as you possibly can. Toss uneasiness and skepticism on the shelf for a while. Try to suspend hasty judgments, and be more patient with unfamiliar usage of familiar words. Allow new conceptions of unity and Divinity to enter and expand you into new ways of thinking, and of being. Read it heedfully and be prepared to take contemplation breaks along the way. Let it sink in. There is a high magic in reading this way.

The magic resides in the reader's overall attitude. This mood of acceptance is precisely how the *Gita* exhorts us to live our lives. This is the invaluable state of mind that brings a happier life! When we imbibe these ancient teachings in this spirit, its high message seeps into our being, prompting and penetrating every thought and act. It becomes a part of us, and we of it. Thus the process of reading the *Gita* becomes an actual experience of the profound truths it brings. Reading it this way is *being* it!

The *Gita*, after all, is not theology or religion — it's poetry. It's a universal love song sung by God to His friend man. It can't be confined by any creed. It's a statement of the truths at the core of what we all already believe, only it makes those truths clearer, so they become immediately useful in our daily lives. Those truths are for our hearts, not just our heads.

The *Gita* is more than just a book, more than mere words or concepts. There is an accumulated potency in it. To read the *Gita* is to be inspired in the true sense of the term: to be “in-spirited,” to inhale the ancient and ever-new breath of spiritual energy.

Now, we too are there on that long-ago yet strangely current battlefield, a witness to Krishna's grand teachings. We too are there, being let in on the secrets. We watch and listen as the Lord Himself, swinging easily between ecstasy and practicality, imparts the absolute deepest and highest teachings. We too are walking through God's precise, loving responses to the most anguishing and important questions of humanity today.